

F O C U S

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Report #12
MCC Peace Section
Task Force on Women in Church and Society

P A R E N T H O O D

December, 1976

Theme: This issue of the Task Force Report is focused on parenthood or, more specifically, childbearing. We think you will enjoy the responses we received from parents, grandparents, and non-parents on this topic.

New members: We'd like to introduce the two new members on the MCC Task Force on Women in Church and Society.

Emma LaRoque is a young Metis woman from Alberta. A graduate of AMBS, Emma is now studying Canadian history at the University of Manitoba where she is also a teaching assistant. Emma has written a book called Defeathering the Indian (Book Society of Canada, paperback) about her experiences growing up in a "white" school system. We welcome Emma to the Task Force.

Gayle Gerber Koontz is presently studying religion in Boston, Mass. Gayle is a graduate of Bethel College and former director of MCC Information Services. She brings a wide background of experience in MCC and the General Conference Mennonite Church to the Task Force. We welcome her.

Report of meeting: The Task Force met November 20 - 21 in Minneapolis. One of the major items on the agenda was an evaluation of goals and philosophy. We decided that much remains to be done—our job is not over!

A major focus for the next year is planning for the involvement of women in the Mennonite World Conference in Wichita in 1978. We are supplying names of possible speakers and discussion leaders and hope to establish some channels whereby women can meet and share concerns.

We also decided to encourage the Mennonite Church to appoint someone to deal specifically with women's concerns (comparable to Herta Funk's assignment in the General Conference) and recommended that the Peace Section plan a seminar for women on peacemaking.

The newsletter was also given priority during this meeting. We decided to increase production-an issue every other month. Gayle Koontz is the new coordinator, so this will be the last newsletter from Ontario.

So long,
Margaret L. Reimer
Sue C. Steiner

* Attention: New editor--Gayle Gerber Koontz. Send all correspondence to
* her at:
* 27 Fairlawn St.
* Everett, Massachusetts
* U.S.A. 02149

RESPONSES AND
REACTIONS

Your report #11 was the most helpful to date. I especially like the readings and litanies which can be used in worship services.

I am thankful to be alive today when a Task Force on Women is a possibility in a Mennonite organization. Personally I have been an individual who has been 'church oriented'. Yet during the past 20 years my most significant work has been done in organizations outside the church structure. It is particularly gratifying to me that a new day has dawned and Menno sisters have in view the time when each of us shall be heard and evaluated for the person each is, instead of being appraised by other standards primarily based on gender.

A special thanks to both of you, Sue and Margaret, for providing a 'meetinghouse' for those with similar feelings.

Mary Jane Hershey
Harleysville, Pa.

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Thank you for your Report #11 which came across my desk today.

I'm sure many hours of thought and work have gone into the editing and production of this report, and in particular into the "LITANY FOR MOTHER'S DAY". The many names appearing in this litany certainly bring to mind the depth of faith of those who have labored, suffered and died the martyr's death for the convictions by which they stood without compromise.

I could not help but wonder how much thought and study had gone into the incorporation of the statement "We remember Mary, the Mother of God."

Every time I pass by our local Catholic Church I am aware of the statue of "Mary" and the words underneath, "Pray for us, Mary, Mother of God." I can never cease to marvel at the fact that those who claim to be the depository of God's revealed truth in this age, The Catholic Church Functionaries, have failed to see that although Jesus was conceived by Mary in the Power of the Holy

Ghost and given birth into this world as the Son of God and the "Son of man", she was the mother only of His humanity and not of His deity: John 8:58; Matt. 12:46-50; John 1:1-14; II Cor. 5:16.

I must say I was shocked that this statement should be part of a litany suggested by the MCC Peace Section Task Force.

I find no difficulty in remembering Mary as God's handmaid in the wonderful event of God in Christ stepping into the world. It seems blasphemous, though, to me to call her the "Mother of God."

John B. Kliewer
MCC Board Member
Marion, South Dakota

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I got hold of a copy of God's Word for Women that was mentioned in Sojourners magazine. It's a careful look at mis-translations and bias in our versions, written in the teens or twenties, last published in 1923. I have reservations about the lengths to which she carries her revisions, but her explanations and personal translation of passages in Gen. 3 & 4 and I Corinthians and I Timothy especially I find as convincing and liberating as anything I've read yet. It strikes me as more reliable in general than All We're Meant To Be.

If you haven't discovered it yet, I think you'll be delighted with the insight Katherine C. Bushnell offers. It is only available now in a private printing from

Ray B. Munson
Box 52
North Collins, N.Y.
for a \$5.00 "donation".

The fact it was written so long ago means of course that Katherine didn't have available the background and scholarship based on more recent mss. findings and archaeological work. It will take someone with more knowledge than the average to decide how sound her conclusions are. But it's certainly worth looking at.

Miriam S. Hess
Mt. Joy, Pa.

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I can't believe MCC's Peace Section could approve abortion. I have a great respect for the Mennonite refusal to take life. I hope you are not breaking this stand against all killing by approving abortion.

Incidentally, we adopted our little girl shortly after liberalized abortion laws took effect in California and we think it's a shame more mothers do not consider the adoption alternative to abortion. We're thankful to God our little girl's mother did.

Anne Kornmeyer
San Diego, Calif.

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RESOURCES

Alone: A Widow's Search for Joy is the title of a new book by Task Force member Katie Funk Wiebe. Writer, English professor and mother, Katie recounts her struggle to gain a foothold after her husband died and left her with four young children. Published by Tyndale.

Women and Development by Luann Habeggar Martin is a monograph in a series on development published by MCC. Luann is also a Task Force member and represented the group at the International Women's Year meet in Mexico City in 1975. Available from MCC, 21 S. 12th Street, Akron, Pa. 17501.

Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie is edited by Ellen Peck and Judith Senderowitz. This book severely criticizes society's exalted view of parenthood which assumes that every couple should have children. It's almost a "polemic against parenthood". Published by T.Y. Crowell Co., 1974.

Marriage, Divorce and the Family Newsletter is published eight times a year by Marriage and Divorce Press, Box 142 Madison Square Station, New York, N.Y. 10010. Cost is \$7.70 a year. It covers religion, law, resources and relevant events from a "leftist feminist" point of view.

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FOCUS

ON

PARENTHOOD

To help focus our thinking on parenthood, the editors asked a variety of Mennonites to respond to the following paragraphs:

"MOST PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY AGREE THAT OUR SOCIETY ENCOURAGES REPRODUCTION AND EXALTS THE ROLE OF PARENTHOOD. IS THIS A HEALTHY PERSPECTIVE OR DO WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR THINKING? HOW DO WE DEAL WITH THE POPULATION PROBLEM, THE INCREASING BREAKDOWN OF MARRIAGES, THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF FAMILY LIFE?

"IT HAS BEEN ARGUED THAT THE ESSENCE OF A WOMAN'S BEING IS HER ABILITY TO BEAR CHILDREN AND THAT THE ESSENCE OF A MARRIAGE IS TO HAVE CHILDREN. WE ARE INTERESTED IN HOW YOU, PERSONALLY, RESPOND TO THIS ISSUE IN YOUR OWN LIFE."

Here are responses from six of these persons.

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I assume the editors asked me to contribute something on the subject of children and child bearing because of our experience in having children come into our family both by birth and adoption. I'm glad to share about this....in fact 16 years ago I thought of writing something. The thing uppermost in my mind then was to tell how we came to the decision to adopt a Korean orphan, the various negotiations and procedures involved, and most of all to relate the joy and excitement the family experienced beginning with the first glimpse of the great Northwest Airlines "stork" circling in the sky for descent.

At this point I'd like instead to reflect about the many similarities in receiving a child at the airport and in the delivery room. It's amazing how parallel they can be.

Progressing through the stages of a pregnancy and working through the stages of adoption are of course different, but both have meaning only because of the anticipated baby. (Few would choose pregnancy and birth for the experience alone.) The overwhelming emotion surging through you when for the first time your child is placed in your arms

is further testimony to the importance of that moment. Something of what parenting means is quickly clarified upon sensing the dependence of this life on your care and nurture.

Parenting is important and the role of parenthood rightly exalted. An obvious truth if there are to be those in the next generation who can help take care of the world, contribute to making life in it good, and parent the next caretakers.

However, the other side of the coin must also be viewed. "Sins of the fathers are being visited upon the children even unto the 3rd and 4th generation." A toll is paid when birthing is not followed by parenting. Deficient parenting or adverse parenting can create tragic results (SYBIL, if you've read that book). Ideally the responsibility of having children would be undertaken only by those with a marriage held together by love and the ability and desire to love and care beyond themselves. Until such is the case, there's the challenge to halt the cycle of poor parenting producing problem people who in turn do poor parenting.

Ways must be found to support and strengthen parents in their important task. People with parenting ability must give of themselves to those who otherwise would experience deficient parenting. Resources must be tapped at many levels to develop people and a society that can be responsible for what it produces, and not produce what it can't love and care for.

Louise Miller
Kitchener, Ontario

* * *

In my heart I have been satisfied for many years that not having children or not being married (until recently) says nothing about my worth or value as a person and more specifically as a woman. From a Biblical perspective I could come to no other conclusion.

But it was not always so. I admit to a painful struggle at about age 35 when I tried to face the fact that I would probably never have a child. Why this struggle? Was it a combination of

a so-called natural desire to produce something which would be a part of me, and on the other hand, a response to society's message to me that the very essence of my female being could only be fully realized through marriage and child bearing? I believe so.

I have felt freer and more whole as a person since I have come to the point where I can unreservedly reject this latter attitude. In coming to this I came also to the beautiful awareness that to leave a part of me behind in this world has nothing to do with physical reproduction. I think it is important that we continue to work at helping people find enrichment and more meaning in marriage and also to support people in their often difficult role of parenthood. But we should find better ways to work at this without at the same time almost negating the validity of the lives of those who for any reason are not included in these categories. This becomes more important as one considers it from the perspective of the world population problem.

However, what seems most important to me is simply to consider it from the perspective of what we do to each other, and to ourselves, if we continue to exalt one person's role in life (i.e. parenting or "wifing") above that of another. Surely we will remain "poor in spirit" until we can deal in a more charitable way on this issue.

Anne W. Dyck
Swift Current, Sask.

* * *

When Ruth and I were married in 1937 we hoped that we might be so fortunate as to have children of our own. As the majority of people who are married, we were indeed fortunate to realize our hope. God blessed us with two sons and two daughters. We were happy before we had children, and although it would have been a disappointment not to have any of our own, we would still have been happy -- although we would almost certainly have been adoptive parents.

We both came from happy homes, and always enjoyed going back to our parental homes with our little ones. Our children contracted the usual diseases of childhood such as Chicken Pox -- but were never seriously ill, and all grew to maturity. It was a delight to watch the little minds

unfold, and to see new skills learned. The development of speech was especially fascinating.

We decided that we would never punish children by putting them to bed, and that we would never force children to eat, for eating and going to bed should be pleasant experiences. We also tried to make family worship a happy time, with the children participating as far as that was possible at a given age. We tried to attend the Parent-Teacher Association meetings when our schedules permitted it, and on one occasion showed slides of a trip (perhaps to Palestine) to a student group.

Ruth, who is an RN, kept diligent notes on the progress and development of each child in a splendid baby book issued by the Chicago Lying-In Hospital. One of the things we were to do was to watch for the first four-word sentence. One day I came home to our apartment when one of our first children was just learning to talk. Ruth was gone for a moment, and the child, surmising that I would think she was washing in the basement, ventured to set me straight: "Mother, basement, washing: No!"

Like other parents, we made many mistakes, but we loved our children and they loved us. Today our sons are working in Science and in the Ministry, and our daughters are a homemaker and a nurse and a writer and artist, respectively. They are also all in the Church, for which we are profoundly grateful.

As Theodore Roosevelt said of his life: "We wouldn't have missed it for anything!"

J.C. Wenger
Goshen, Ind.

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1. "Familiness" is much needed, especially, perhaps, in our mobile society. Lives are atomized, disjointed, unrelated. To reduce the normal size of a family unit further to only the spouses without children, without forming other groups embodying significant relatedness, would be a move in the wrong direction. What is needed is larger and more deeply connected human units, not more atomization. Children are an important part of the

community-building process, partly because they provide intergenerational interaction in the most vital way possible, and even more fundamentally because they form a relationship with parents which is ongoing, a relationship for which responsibilities are taken over the long haul. This stands in contrast with most relationships outside the biological family which for most of us are transitory (at least in terms of depth involvement), no matter how significant those relationships are at a given time. An ongoing family-type relationship provides real opportunity for growing and maturing, for caring for and being cared for which are not available in most other relationships. Such ongoing relationships are also somewhat threatening, containing, as they do, the possibility of deeper hurt and rejection than do more passing relationships.

2. The parenting, nurturing role is one important aspect of human life and experience. It is most obviously and naturally fulfilled in raising a family. This is important and to be valued as one aspect of all that is involved in being human, but it is not, I think, essential to full and rich life in the way that some other more basic experiences are, such as the general experience of deep warm human relationships. There are also, no doubt, ways other than parenting to express the nurturing aspect of personhood.

3. Since I'm a man, the key issue for me is childrearing, not childbearing. The question is whether energy which would go into rearing children is best invested there, both in terms of personal growth and in terms of mission in the world. What do I/we want from life and what do I/we hope to contribute to the lives of others? Contributing "basic trust" and a sense of stewardship for God's world to a child is nothing to be despised or taken for granted. Yet it is not the only worthwhile contribution one might make. Sharing the unique relationship of parent-child is something to be treasured. Yet it is not the only thing which might give meaning and joy to life.

4. The decision is made much more difficult by the structures of our society. I think that if we knew we would have significant opportunities to work part-time in

the areas of our expertise and interest at least during the years when children would be at home, we would decide to have children. But the way it looks from here, it may be necessary to choose between full-time work and no children, full-time work and children with the incredible busyness that would involve, full-time work and hired child care, or one working full-time and the other raising children full-time. None of these options is appealing. Sometimes, in our optimistic moments, we hope things might work out, but jobs are structured in a way which tends to dampen that hope.

5. I/we are strongly attracted to the idea of having (2) children. The primary constraint is the fear that it would mean cutting ourselves off from opportunities to do other things (vocationally, primarily) in which we have deep interest and to which we feel a strong commitment. We would gladly pursue vocational goals less vigorously, if things were structured so we could. But can we?

Ted Koontz
Boston, Mass.

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My child-bearing and -raising years are past, so it would be easy to try to make what actually happened neatly fit some idealized theory. Fortunately, though control of family size was fairly chancy a quarter-century ago, my ideal and actual family size coincided so closely as to give no dissatisfaction or disappointment. It was true then that my self-concept as a woman was inextricably connected with motherhood. Every childless couple I knew without exception had, in my eyes, missed something precious.

To think of being a young woman asking myself how I feel about this question is an unreliable exercise. Certainly as I see childless couples I make no judgment as to what is best or desirable for them. One wishes every child born into this world were a planned and wanted one. That family size will more and more be limited to one or two children makes for nostalgic reminiscing of the precious times had by the generous-sized families of former

days. But hopefully, what is lost in sibling jostling and sharing is made up in parental enrichment.

So to your question, "Is the essence of a marriage to have children?" I would say, "The essence of marriage is to be a supportive, up-building person, first to one's spouse, and then to anyone who comes within the sphere of that marriage."

I wish there were ways that cross-sections of communities could, if they chose, form themselves more readily into extended family units. "Only" children would have sibling-like relations, the unmarried could relate to families, and parents could have release from the pressures of total care and responsibility. It seems to me that a more sane and humane world would emerge out of the generations that had experienced this kind of support.

Eleanor High
Kitchener, Ontario

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As a child 'in the middle' in a family of 15, I frequently sensed negative vibrations coming my way for being part of so large a family. When I married I was determined not to start a family for several years. Inquiries from close relatives as to methods of birth control revealed that I had four choices--abstinence, withdrawal, the rhythm method and the vinegar douche. Probably because most of my peers and I found ourselves with unplanned pregnancies, we tried to hide the fact that we were pregnant for as long as possible. These days prospective parents seem eager to announce a prospective birth. I feel this creates a healthier atmosphere than our secrecy and game playing.

The constant fear of pregnancy was a major source of frustration. I was reminded often of the old German proverb spoken of young girls seen walking with their head held high: "Armut und viel Kinder werden das Näschen scho'd ducken." (Poverty and many children will humble a proud maiden.) I felt subtle and not so subtle pressures from society to be productive.

Younger women today tell me they feel pressures not to have more than two or three children. Increasingly I hear that couples with only two children are making sure with either a vasectomy or a tubal

ligation that they will not have any more. There are many more who are convinced that two is enough but they are reluctant to make their decision that final. I have found this a touchy subject to discuss with people my age or older. They are on the defensive because they have larger families. Since we were not aware that a population explosion existed, we need not feel guilty but should support and encourage young couples who choose to restrict their family size or even remain childless.

In retrospect the childbearing years were years of fulfillment. We enjoyed the children. One always felt needed and there was little time for boredom or self-pity. At times it seemed the children would always be small, now it seems they never were. Although my husband was most co-operative and actually enjoyed diapering the babies, as well as dressing them, the greater amount of time spent with the children was still mine. Even with grown children I often resent the way most fathers plan and carry out their schedules away from home seemingly without consideration of their children.

With grown children, it is very easy to spend days and weeks passing each other in the doorway to and from our individual involvements. Just like I needed to consciously choose my priorities when the children were small, I still need to do this. Often it is a small matter to rearrange my timetable, like going out to the garden after they leave for the ballgame and just staying in the house and being available the hour they are in the house. These years, like the early childhood years, will soon be just a memory.

Women of my day were programmed to selflessly give of themselves in the nurturing of children and catering to husbands. This is changing very rapidly. If the raising of children is indeed the high calling and unequalled challenge we are led to believe, then we are cheating our husbands if they cannot share more in this venture. The child is the richer for being influenced more directly by both mother and father. Many modern husbands recognize this and try to

get in on the action.

Our society gives recognition on a money-for-services-rendered basis. When we receive recognition in concrete terms for the valuable role we play, our sense of self-worth will improve and everyone will benefit.

As the patterns of family life change, and the roles of men and women are re-defined, it is inevitable that we have an increase in marriage breakdown. Extensive pre-marital counselling for every couple getting married and follow-up counselling at regular intervals would help. I am most upset when very young couples separate, because for most of us it takes a half dozen years or more to achieve the 'happily ever after stage'. Actually we never reach the stage where we can stop working at a marriage.

Elsie Neufeld
Boissevain, Manitoba

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REPORT ON WOMEN & THE COVENANT CONFERENCE

Winnipeg--At the Women & the Covenant Conference held here October 22-24, women of different lifestyles and occupations talked about ministry. Speakers included women from a variety of vocations: a United Church pastor, an Anglican deacon, a community development worker, a homemaker, a writer, a professor and a psychologist.

The ecumenical conference, an outgrowth of a similar meeting in Saskatoon last year, was attended by five Mennonite women.

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MORE RESOURCES

Partnership: Marriage and the Committed Life by Edward R. Dufresne.

The question of how marriage and Christian commitment relate to each other has been a thorny one throughout Christian history. The author (a pastoral counselor whose wife is a United Methodist minister) uses that history as a back-drop in presenting new angles on the God/marriage dilemma. As the institution of marriage becomes less socially, economically, and biologically bound, says Dufresne, we can choose marriage as "an alternate lifestyle of commitment." Chapters are included on solitude in marriage, intimacy and community in marriage, faithfulness, sexual partnership, and time and possessions in marriage. The directions from which Dufresne approaches these topics is always fresh and unexpected, leaving the reader with new insights about human emotional needs and about the nature of partnership.

The book received the 1976 Religious Book Award in the personal/family category given jointly by the Associated Church Press and the Catholic Press Association. It is published by Paulist Press in a square oversized paperback, with black and white photos by John Forastee.

Women, Men and the Bible by Virginia Mollenkott.

Biblical exegesis at a more popular level than All We're Meant to Be. Includes direct replies to the Total Woman and Fascinating Womanhood philosophies. To be published by Abingdon in paperback early in January, 1977.

The Hurt and Healing of Divorce by Darlene Petri.

A personal account of how one Christian woman, after an unavoidable divorce, coped with the harsh judgment of others (and of herself), with discrimination, and with single parenthood. Published by D.C. Cook in paperback.